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A perversion of American foreign policy



Thomas L. Friedman

OPINION

What happened in the Oval Office on Friday — the unceremonious dismissal of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine by President Trump and Vice President JD Vance — was something that had never happened in the nearly 250-year history of the United States: In a major war in Europe, America's president clearly sided with the aggressor, the dictator and the invader against the democrat, the freedom fighter and the invaded.

You want an analogy? Imagine it when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel visited the White House last month. Trump and Vance told him that the war with Hamas had gone on too long, too many lives had been lost and it was costing America too much money, so it was time for him and the Israeli people to do a deal with the Hamas aggressor.

Because Russia did to Ukraine in Feb. 24, 2022 what Hamas did to Israel on Oct. 7, 2023 — a surprise invasion, murder and the ensuing sexual violence to wreak destruction on another nation and its society. Trump took Bibi's side 100 percent against Hamas, and now he is taking Putin's side 100 percent against Zelenskyy and Ukraine.

It is hard to express what a break this is in American foreign policy. We once stood on the side of liberty and those fighting for it around the world. Yes, there have been times the isolationist heresies to our population have held us back and had to be persuaded. Yes, there have been times when — in support of the larger cause of liberty against dangerous foes like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union — we had to align ourselves temporarily with dictators.

But I can't think of a single time when a U.S. president declared that the democratically elected leader of a country preserving liberty was a "villain" who started the war with his neighbor — when it was the vicious neighboring dictator who actually started the war.

If you listen to Trump, everything America has done for Ukraine is pure Friedman. PAGE 14

The New York Times publishes opinion from a wide range of perspectives in hopes of promoting constructive debate about consequential questions.



Ukrainian marines firing rockets in Pokrovsk, eastern Ukraine. "Russia will be willing to keep fighting for longer" if Ukraine loses U.S. support, one Russian source said.

Putin's hand is stronger after clash in Oval Office

NEWS ANALYSIS
BY ELIN

Trump's dressing down
of Ukrainian leader may
intensify and prolong war

BY ANTON TROJANOWSKI,
NATALIA VASILEVA
AND PAUL SONNE

President Trump says he wants a quick cease-fire in Ukraine. But President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia appears to be in no rush, and the recent blowup between Mr. Trump and Ukraine's president may give Russia's leader the kind of ammunition he needs to prolong the fight.

With the American alliance with Ukraine suffering a dramatic, public rupture, Mr. Putin now seems even more likely to hold out for a deal on his terms — and he could even be tempted to expand his push on the battlefield.

The extraordinary scene in Washington on Friday — in which Mr. Trump lambasted President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine — was broadcast on the top story on state television in Russia on Saturday morning. It played into three years of Kremlin propaganda casting Mr. Zelenskyy as a feeble ruler who would sooner or later exhaust the patience of his Western backers.

For the Kremlin, perhaps the most important message came in later remarks by Mr. Trump, who suggested that if Ukraine did not agree to a "cease-fire now," the war-torn country would have to "fight it out" without American help.

That could set up an outcome that Mr. Putin has long sought, at the cost of tens of thousands of Russian lives: a dominant position over Ukraine and wide-ranging concessions from the West.

In fact, Mr. Trump's professed attempts to end the war quickly could intensify and prolong it, experts warned. If the United States is really ready to abandon Ukraine, Mr. Putin could try to seize more Ukrainian territory and end up with more leverage, if and when peace talks ultimately take place.

"Russia will be willing to keep fighting for longer, and more bitterly," said Konstantin Benichukov, a Moscow newspaper editor with Kremlin ties, describing the consequences of Mr. Trump's public break with Mr. Zelenskyy. "If Zelenskyy says the Ukrainian people are ready to keep on fighting, Moscow will say, 'Sure, let's keep fighting.'"

If the angry encounter in Washington PUTIN, PAGE 3

UKRAINE AND EUROPE TRY TO MOVE ON
President Volodymyr Zelenskyy hopes to repair the U.S. relationship, while reaching out to European allies. PAGE 3

LEADERS SCRAMBLE FOR SELF-RELIANCE
As the United States pivots from Ukraine, European nations are rallying to ramp up military spending. PAGE 4

An Argentine crypto collapse

Investors lose \$250 million
as scandal ensnares leader,
who promoted digital coin

BY JACK NICKE
AND DAVID YAFFE-BELLANY

The scandal began with a tweet. "The world wants to invest in Argentina," Javier Milei, Argentina's president, posted at 7:51 p.m. on Valentine's Day, offering a code to buy a new cryptocurrency.

The digital coin was called SLiBra, and it had been created 20 minutes earlier. Over the next few hours, thousands of people invested. SLiBra's value skyrocketed.

Then it swiftly collapsed. The largest stakeholders had sold their coins, leaving almost everyone else with a collective \$250 million in losses.

To cryptocurrency veterans, it was a classic "rug pull." A celebrity joins a new digital coin, prices soar and then investors who own most of the coin pull the rug. They sell their stakes for a big profit at the expense of amateur investors who got in later.

To Argentina, it was a national scandal. The president, critics said, had just scammed his constituents. The opposi-



Javier Milei, Argentina's president, at the Conservative Political Action Conference near Washington. Argentine citizens have filed criminal complaints over a financial fiasco.

tion called for impeachment. Argentine citizens filed a dozen criminal complaints. A federal prosecutor opened an investigation, with Mr. Milei as a target.

Then Mr. Milei left for Washington. At the Conservative Political Action Conference on Feb. 22, he gave a combative speech about President Trump, the

other president who promoted a new cryptocurrency this year that soared and then crashed. That coin, STX, generated enormous profits for insiders and a cumulative \$2 billion in losses for more than 800,000 other investors.

Mr. Trump has claimed ignorance. "I don't know if it benefited" me, he said. "I

didn't know much about it." (The Trump family and its business partners earned nearly \$100 million in trading fees alone on the coin.)

Following the ballooning SLiBra scandal in Argentina, Mr. Milei took a similar approach. He did not earn a cent, he said, instead, he claimed a small startup in Singapore, KIP Protocol, that few in the crypto industry had heard of.

"You'll notice that the company that organized the launch, KIP, explicitly stated that I had nothing to do with it," he said in a prime time interview last month.

But Mr. Milei's story has begun to unravel, showing how crypto and politics have increasingly blended to enrich the powerful and take from almost everyone else.

The origins of the SLiBra scandal trace back to a conference in Argentina last year at which an American crypto consultant and an Argentine business partner of Mr. Milei tried to sell access to the president, according to interviews and documents reviewed by The New York Times. It eventually led to meetings in the presidential offices and a planned partnership with Dove Partners, the founder of Burstool Sports.

Since the crash, evidence has emerged contradicting the president's ARGENTINA, PAGE 5

Jokes flow freely in Syria, at least for now



Sharif al-Hamzi performing in Damascus in December. His routine included jokes about the former regime, which would have been unthinkable just a few weeks earlier.

DAMASCUS, SYRIA

Comics embrace liberty
but worry that freedom of
expression may be fleeting

BY RAGA ABDULMARIM

Sharif al-Hamzi shivered, clutched his arms and pretended to go through Syria's regime withdrawal.

Standing before an audience in Damascus, he was telling a joke that would have been unthinkable until just a few weeks before, when President Bashar al-Assad was suddenly ousted after more than five decades of his family's oppressive rule.

"We need rehab centers. You can't just take this guy away from our life like that — it has to be gradual," the 33-year-old comedian and screenwriter said, describing the omnipresent posters and magazine spreads depicting the Assad dynasty, to laughter from the crowd. He

continued to shake. "They'll ask us what drug were you addicted to; we'll say, 'Bashar al-Assad!'"

It was a night of stand-up in late December at the Zawayn Art Gallery in the heart of the Syrian capital. Half of the comedians performing that night had been living abroad after fleeing the country during the 13-year civil war that ended with Mr. al-Assad's ouster.

Their routines included standard comedy fare — religion, sex and the pressure to get married — but the biggest punchline of the night was Mr. al-Assad. One comedian referred to him throughout his routine as "that whore."

The comedians were relishing the chance to say things that for decades Syrians would have been too scared to utter, even in private company. Four of the notorious mukhabarat, the secret intelligence service, was ingrained so deeply that Syrians lived with the cautionary warning that "the walls have ears."

But even as they enjoyed the liberty to make new jokes, the comedians, like SYRIA, PAGE 2

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